PERGAMON

Journal of Rural Studies 20 (2004) 131–141

JOURNAL OF RURAL STUDIES

www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

Where the wild things are: the evolving iconography of rural fauna

Henry Buller*

Countryside and Community Research Unit, University of Gloucestershire, Francis Close Hall, Swindon Rd, Cheltenham, Glos GL50 4AZ, UK

Abstract

This paper explores the changing relationship between 'nature' and rurality through an examination of the shifting iconography of animals, and particularly 'wild' animals, in a rural setting. Drawing upon a set of examples, the paper argues that the faunistic icons of rural areas are evolving as alternative conceptions of the countryside, of nature and of the classic dichotomy between 'wild' and 'domesticated' animals are being re-constructed. The re-introduction of wild species, either through deliberate strategies or through natural migration, the diversification of husbandry to include rare and protected breeds and the increasing number of reported sightings of strange and unfamiliar animals all point to a change, or changes, in the place accorded to 'wild' things in countryside that have become, themselves, domesticated and gentrified.
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Keywords: Animals; Rural; Nature; Wild species; Iconography

> Humans are always, and have always been, emeshed in social relations with animals to the extent that the latter, the animals, are undoubtedly constitutive of human societies in all sorts of ways (Philo and Wilbert, 2000, p. 2).

Animals are key constituents of rural space, that lovingly cultivated and controlled nature (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998, p. 179). Indeed, society's relationship to animals in general has largely grown out of the set of activities and endeavours that are traditionally associated with the countryside, from animal breeding and domestication to the aesthetic appreciation of a gentle, ordered and unthreatening nature (Thomas, 1983). Fundamental to this constitution process is the careful historical selection of those animals deemed appropriate to rural space (Dunlap, 1999) and associated with this, the exclusion, either through physical or symbolic means, of those deemed inappropriate, the wild animals,

It is argued in this paper that recent years have seen this modernist configuration, and its supportive iconography, challenged in a number of ways. Shifts in the animalia of rural space are held to reveal new dimensions to human/animal relations as the traditional fault lines between wild and domestic are redrawn following a more post-industrial constructivist agenda of society's relationship to nature. Under the ascribed banners of biodiversity and contested anthropocentrism, wild(er) species are, it is claimed here, on the way back in—to borrow Wolch and Emel's (1995) phrase. As such, they, and our re-assessed association with them, are challenging the constructed naturalness of the countryside by providing an alternative authenticity for nature.

This paper examines this shift, and its consequences for human/animal relations, by considering case studies of this new rural animalia; species re-introduction, rare breeds restoration and cryptozoology. Although all three examples are strongly mediated by human agency, they represent different points along the inter-species interface and varying degrees of direct or indirect human interception. The paper is composed of three sections. The first explores the dynamic and fertile domain of human/animal relations as they articulate with notions of rural nature. This is followed by three case studies. In the final section of the paper, arguments are put forward for a new iconography of animals within a re-constructed rural nature.

1. The wild frontier

There is a sense in which Western European society's relationship to wild animals is shifting in a significant manner. The places beyond cities, towns and their rural fringes, the forests, the wilderness, have long been

*Tel.: +44-1242-532982; fax: +44-1242-543273.
E-mail address: hbuller@glos.ac.uk (H. Buller).

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doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2003.08.009

considered synonymous with nature's 'otherness' and non-humanity, with beasts, demons, the very antithesis of human civilisation (and as such, a defining component of that civilisation). The various processes of human civilisation and later modernisation saw the growing subjugation of the natural world and its animalia through a range of practical processes, including domestication, species eradication, breeding and habitat change, and philosophical standpoints, from religious iconographic appropriation through representation, scientific classification and ultimately bio-ethical displacement. This has had the effect, as Whatmore and Thorne (1998) have shown, of conflating spatial and species wildness into one of the composite elements of a set of convenient, though increasingly contested, binary categories such as 'them/there'–'us/here', society–nature, domesticated–wild and so on. The wilderness, and the wild animals associated with it, are by definition distant whether it be in geographical, economic, biological or even moral terms (Wolch and Emel, 1995). This very distance conveys upon them a sense of legitimacy as real nature.

A critical element to this process of distancing the wild, has been the careful and long-term construction of the tame, which includes domesticating and commodifying nature; processes that arguably find their keenest expression in rural spaces. The construction–modification, organisation–selection and exploitation–celebration of nature are for many the defining characteristic of rurality yet the economic as well as the aesthetic status of rural areas is generally predicated upon the exclusion of the wild (Thomas, 1983). The contemporary countryside, as many have observed, is defined by particular conceptualisations, productions and consumptions of nature(s), and its domestication by human actions; from farming and forest planting to view-points and farm zoos as Macnaghten and Urry (1998, in particular, Chapter 6) have so well explored. Within this reconstructed nature, animals—or at least certain, selected animals—play a central *symbolic* role in popular perception (Harrison, 1993; Jones, 1995, 2000), political representation (Woods, 1998) and indeed in providing a metaphorical moral code (Bell, 1994). For the (urban) subjects of Harrison's (1993) study, rural nature was epitomised by foxes, vixens, kestrels and hedgehogs, herons and cormorants, squirrels and ladybirds. Through husbandry, animals play an *instrumental* role in the commodification of rural spaces and resources as part of the primordial or defining rural economic activity; leading in some cases, to the very definition of such spaces as 'natural' (Picon, 1988). Scruton (1996, p.144) for example, writes: "As with all forms of husbandry, cattle farming should be seen in its full context—and that means, as a feature of the total ecology of the countryside", going on to assert that "the symbiotic relationship between the livestock farmer and the hunt has shaped the English landscape, ensuring that it retains its dual character as producer of human food and complex wildlife habitat" (p. 145). Unsurprisingly perhaps, in his review of interdisciplinary rural research on nature–society relations undertaken in France during the 1970s and 1980s, Jollivet observes that the majority concern livestock husbandry (Jollivet, 1992).

The twentieth century saw these different components of human/animal relations taken to their limits and refined. Domestication has been extended far beyond the traditional beasts of burden to include the entire faunistic composition of rural space and, more recently still, its gene pool. The countryside has become largely devoid of the larger predatory species who not only thrive on the very animals humanity has painstakingly bred and engineered but also compete with hunters for the few remaining species deemed interesting to chase and kill. It is a grazed countryside. Species are protected certainly but in wildlife parks, zoos and special zones where lions and tigers are as common, if not more common, than formerly indigenous species such as the wolf and the otter. This is a safe countryside where humanity nurtures and is, in return, nurtured by an accessible, appropriated and unthreateningly recognisable nature. "Nature smiles back at us with human features", writes Scruton (1997, p. 471), "since we have carefully ensured that it has no other".

Macnaghten and Urry (1995) observe that the social dimensions of nature have too long been ignored; they constitute a 'blind spot', as Eder (1996, p. 32) calls it. Yet as they, and others, have amply demonstrated, nature (and of course, rurality) are intrinsically defined and structured by—and perceived through—human agency, culture and ideology (Short, 1991; Dunlap, 1999). Although it has become commonplace to oppose social constructivist and realist approaches to the conceptualisation of nature within environmental sociology (Benton, 1993; Soper, 1995; Buttel, 2000, for a review of the debate see Franklin, 1999, 2002), both, as Tovey (2003) points out, run into difficulties when it comes to animals (see also Ingold, 1988). Are animals "blank paper" (Tester, 1992, p. 46) upon which humanity writes its own script, and even if we do intellectually conceptualise them as such does this necessarily deny them any independent existence (Burningham and Cooper, 1999)?

There are three points to be made here. First, whatever the conceptual stance adopted with respect to issues and concerns surrounding nature and the environment and human relations to them, recognition of the independent materiality of animals is undoubtedly growing within the social sciences. This comes from a rejection of anthropocentrism as the starting point for our dealings with animals and the adoption of a process that Emel and Wolch (1998) refer to as the decentring of the subject. Hence, within animal studies, and in

particular animal geographies (Philo and Wilbert, 2000), we are moving away, on the one hand, from the classic imagined and representational approaches to animals and, on the other, from understandings derived essentially from their usefulness to humanity and to wealth creation (Castree, 2002). In their stead, a new agenda is currently exploring contested representationalism (Emel, 1998), relational ethics (Whatmore, 1997), notions of animal agency (Jones, 2000) and the 'animalisation' of disciplines such as geography (Philo and Wilbert, 2000) and sociology (Tovey, 2003).

Second, the categorisation and differentiation of animals into wild, natural and domestic is a wholly human conceit (Anderson, 1997). The sliding scale of seemingly independent animalian materiality (which goes from less to more rather than from none to all—for example, from household pets to Galapagos lizards), traditionally links wild with un-domesticated. Farm animals, as the quintessential hybrids, are held to exemplify the conceptual mid-point (Buller and Morris, 2003). Yet despite de-animalising human intervention in all aspects of their lives, from pre-birth to post-death, farm animals remain nonetheless materially distinct and, in certain circumstances, increasingly valued for their (commodified) 'naturalness' Furthermore, as Armengaud (2001) points out, the more we invest farm animals and indeed pets with anthropomorphic tendencies, the more we paradoxically challenge the anthropocentrism that defines our relationship to them. So 'wild' becomes, to use Whatmore and Thorne again, a ''relational achievement'' (1998, p. 437), a negotiated terrain that ultimately reflects both the human and the natural condition (Anderson, 1997). As such, it is far from being static. From 'wild' as undomesticated and un-domesticatable, as physically excluded and confined to those real and imaginary spaces beyond civilisation, today we have a new wildness to contend with, one that celebrates its non-humanness rather than being defined by it. Yet, although the truly wild are arguably not the lions and tigers whose mammalian familiarity breeds anthropomorphic contempt and spatial distance but the species that are so biologically distant as to remain beyond our appropriation, it is the changing societal position with respect to those more accessible species that largely define our relationship to the natural world.

Third, and drawing upon both Macnaghten and Urry (1998) and Franklin (2002), it is increasingly apparent that while we have, in recent years, grown accustomed to accepting differentiation and local contingencies in social organisation and social relations, we have been reluctant to extent this to our exploration of nature and natures. ''Increasingly'', writes Franklin (2002, p. 52) ''the natural world of the modern nation state becomes fragmented into local natures and lifestyle natures. Under these conditions, there is no authoritative agreement as to how local nature should be managed, used or consumed''. This is echoed in Emel and Wolch's call (1998) for a greater appreciation of the (human) cultural forms that influence human–animal relations. While much has been written on how societies materially construct nature (see for example Cronon, 1991, 1996), current culturally driven post-industrial value-shifts are increasingly re-making and re-constructing natures, or at least societal relations and interactions with them. Such re-constructions of the animalian iconography of the contemporary countryside are the subject of this paper.

2. Re-constructing the rural animalia

What happens then, when the 'wild' creeps back into the domesticated and humanised nature that is the European countryside, when familiar rural areas become home again, at least for some people, to a renewed un-domesticated animalia? Franklin (2002, p. 58) argues that for most people, their relations with the natural world take place in an around their dwelling places, their homes and their gardens, the countryside and the parks. As we have said above, in most of these spaces, nature has been specifically and intentionally sorted out and managed. However, the wild beasts, whether real or virtual, seen or imagined, are coming back into the countryside and with them an associated and re-constructed iconography of nature in rural space that increasingly celebrates the wild over the domesticated, species diversity over species specialisation, hawks over blackbirds, wolves over sheep. The re-introduction of wild species, either through deliberate strategies or through natural migration (and indeed the polemic that, in certain countries, surrounds these different modalities of re-introduction, see below), attempts at the restoration of natural pre-human-intervention ecosystems, the diversification of husbandry to include rare and protected breeds and the increasing number of reported sightings of strange and unfamiliar animals all point to a change, or changes, in the place accorded to 'wild' things in domesticated and gentrified countrysides that, in recent years, have seen a growing debate relating to the use and portrayal of rural fauna. This paper explores how the faunistic icons of rural areas are evolving as alternative conceptions of the countryside, of nature and of the classic antinomy between 'wild' and 'domesticated' animals being re-constructed. Animals are used in novel ways to represent new, different, alternative and sometimes conflictual conceptualisations, one the one hand, of rurality (its functions, its appearance, its management and its governance) and, on the other hand, of nature (its definition, its relationship to human activities and endeavours, its composition and also its management). As such, we ascribe wild animals with a

new representational potency and a new legitimacy in a revised 'natural' order. Yet, this is a contested process. The wild is, in Whatmore's (2002, p. 34) phrase, a new "strategic site in environmental politics". At one level, it reveals competing 'constructions' amongst groups and interests, networks and alliances, whose views of what rural space is ultimately for (and for whom) can be strongly antithetic (for example, see Skogen and Krange, 2003). At another, it suggests a more profound unease about the place (and definition) of human identity within nature (Wolfe, 2003).

The following section of this paper is based around three chronicles of how these processes of re-construction are chipping away at the former boundaries between wild and non-wild within the countryside. Selected from a range of contemporary animal/countryside issues currently being tracked by the author, all three draw upon different aspects of wildness. The first looks at the re-introduction of wild species that historically occupied rural spaces before human practices effectively drove them out. The second explores what some have labelled as cryptozoology, the increasing number of 'big cats' and other otherwise unexplained sightings of large wild animals. These are 'alien' wild species, non-indigenous for the most part, yet increasingly part of the reconstituted iconography (however materially justified or not) of particularly remote rural places such as moorlands and heaths. Finally, a third case study considers the protection and reconstitution of rare farm-animal breeds. This offers another take on the concept of 'wild' and its representation. As farm animals, these are not wild in the classic sense. However, their 'rusticity' and their appearance as 'traditional' breeds, unaffected by the selection procedures and genetic manipulation, mark them as more 'natural' and hence, more animalian. Of course, there are other examples one could choose from, notably the hunting debate, animal welfare and the myriad issues associated with both the BSE and Foot and Mouth crises (for example, Scruton, 1996). However, the three chronicles chosen here are illustrative of a significant shift in the way in which the classic association of animal types and species with the countryside and with nature is being modified. All three are also contentious, first, in that they oppose different social groups and their own 'constructions' of nature and 'assumptions' relating to what fauna they associate with rural spaces and, second, because they draw upon different conceptions of science and the relationship between, on the one hand, scientific practice and method, and, on the other hand, cultural and social belief and knowledge. Finally, all three offer a challenge to the notion of nature's authenticity within a rural setting. Methodologically, they have been researched through documentary and interview techniques both in Britain and France carried out over the last three years.

2.1. Wild species re-introduction

The re-introduction of wild animal species back into the rural areas they once inhabited before being driven out or becoming extinct, has become, in recent years, a widely spread phenomenon in Europe and the United States. Obviously, we are only talking here about the larger species. Indeed, this whole paper is rather specific to larger, essentially, mammalian species, what the WWF calls 'large fauna'. Within Europe, and particularly in France, the range of re-introduced species is considerable (though it needs to be noted that in France, the number of species rendered extinct over the last 100 years is relatively minor compared with other countries, notably the UK): the grey wolf, the brown bear, the lynx, the otter, the beaver, the ibex and a range of predatory birds are the common re-introduction targets in a range of states. In a number of European (France, Norway, Austria) countries and elsewhere (the US, Mexico), wolf re-introduction has become an important and contentious issue. In the UK, where the last bears were hunted out around 2000 years ago and the last recorded wolf dates from 1767, species re-introduction programs have focused upon a number of birds of prey and upon the beaver and wild boar, whose experimental re-introduction in Scotland and in a number of controlled areas of Southern England has largely failed. Although there has recently been talk of experimentally re-introducing the grey wolf to parts of Northern Scotland, most attention in the UK appears to have been paid to the unplanned introduction of essentially non-native species such as the coypu which escaped from fur farms in East Anglia to establish itself in that region's rivers, taking over 10 years to eradicate, the mink, also present as a result of escapes (both aided and unaided) from fur farms, and wallabies the last colony of which currently exists around Loch Lomond in Scotland.

Significantly, across Europe, many of species re-introductions took place some years ago and only recently have attracted the attention of different social groups, professional organisations and, notably, the media. The Lynx was formally re-introduced into Germany in the middle of Second World War (1939), in Switzerland the late 1960s, later establishing itself in the Vosges and in Alsace in France in the early 1970s (though Lynx have never been extinct from the Pyrenees region on the Franco-Spanish frontier). The Ibex was introduced into the French Vanoise National Park in the early 1960s has now fully re-established itself, there being an estimated 2500 individuals in the wider Alpes today. The Brown Bear, about which so much has been said and written, numbered around 70 individuals in the mid 1950s in the Pyrénées region. Although a planned re-introduction of the bear into the Vercours Park in the Alpes during the late 1980s and early 1990s was

abandoned, the Pyrenees continues to be the focus both for the maintenance of the shrinking indigenous French bear population and for the planned re-introduction of 'foreign' bears to augment the local bear population which has now dwindled to 7 or 8 individuals. What has polarised debate about species re-introduction in Europe today though, has been the grey wolf (Breitenmoser, 1998; Larrère, 1999; Skogen, 1996).

The wolf population of France, which has migrated from central Italy, appeared first in 1990 and currently comprises around 30 individuals located, for the most part in the Mercantour National Park and the Vercours and Queras Regional Parks, areas given over predominantly to extensive pastoralist agriculture. Formal recognition of the wolves' new residential status came in 1992 from the French Ministry of the Environment, swiftly followed by the first reported sheep and lamb kills. As in other countries, two opposing groups, coalesced (Buller, 2001): the first, made up of local and national naturalists, ecologists, mobile town-dwellers many of whom were members of environmental or amenity NGOs, tourists organisations and members of the French Ministry of the Environment (which is the responsible authority for the Mercantour National Park and Vercours Regional Park). For all of these people, the re-appearance of the wolves is seen in a universally positive light. The second group is made up of local farmers and shepherds, supported by the wider agricultural policy community as a whole, hunters and some of the mountain guides and guards. For them, the wolf is very much an unwelcome intruder that threatens their economic livelihood, their social legitimacy and the mountain environment that they have contributed to create. Though pro-wolf interests, who are by far and away the more numerically significant, offer a series of technical management solutions (Bracque, 1999; Chevallier, 1999) to the supposedly natural phenomenon of the wolf's return, the social and economic impacts are marginalised by an implicit hierarchy that reverses the classic modernist order in placing a constructed pastoral nature (home to a wide diversity of domesticated and wild species but also rural human communities) lower down a hypothesised scale of value to that of a nature occupied and dominated by wolves (one in which lambs and sheep are, de facto, excluded other than as prey—and a limited and non-renewable prey source at that). No wonder, claim certain commentators, that the shepherds and farmers feel cheated and betrayed by an external and scientific hegemonic naturalism that continues to nurture the eternal false dichotomy between humanised nature and supposedly true nature (Deverre, 1999).

2.2. *Cryptozoology and the return of the 'Big Cats'*

On the 28th of February 2000, readers of the Daily Express in the UK were warned that "The dangers of the jungle could soon be in your backyard" (Rosamond, 2000). On the 8th May 2001, a lynx was captured while sitting on a garden fence, like the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland, in suburban Cricklewood, North London (O'Neil, 2001). Between the two events, hundreds of 'sightings' were recorded in the UK of large cat-like animals wandering around the English countryside (an average of 350 recorded sightings per year). Dogs and farm livestock were reported as having been killed, maimed or attacked by what have become generically known as 'Alien Big Cats'. According to one expert (quoted in the Daily Telegraph of the 28th February 2000), more than 100 of these animals (generally pumas, leopards, lynx, ocelot) are thought to be currently loose in the rural areas of the UK. They go under different local names; the 'Fen Tiger' (121 reported sightings in Leicestershire and Rutland since January 2000), the 'Beast of Bodmin Moor', first spotted in the mid 1980s and, as late as 1997, authenticated puma footprints were found in mud on the moor (this despite the official identification of two Big Cat skulls found on the moor as being from a leopard skin rug and from a taxidermists display), the Surrey Puma, The Durham Puma, the Nottingham Lion, the Cougar of Cupar and the Cambridgeshire Tiger, which turned out to be a tiger-print car-seat cover. Although, sightings do occur in suburban areas (for example, the Cricklewood lynx mentioned above), this is widely presented as an essentially rural phenomenon, with the majority of 'big cats' being sighted in the counties of the South West region of England and in Scotland (which represent 23% and 19% of all sightings in 2002 respectively, British Big Cat Society, 2003). The 'Big Cats Society' makes the following claim:

> The numbers of these big cats in the UK is running into many hundreds and they have fully evolved to living and surviving in the British countryside The highly successfull breeding of these cats in the British Isles is due to two reasons. Firstly there is a great abundance of food. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly is the fact that there are no species to compete with them. The breeding becomes regular, with the offspring finding, without difficulty, a territory of thier own with adequate prey to support them. Add to this the fact that the British countryside is well vegetated, offering plenty of cover, and you have the perfect environment for these animals success. (Big Cats, 2001)

Common to all these reported events are the 'cat like' movements and general appearance of the animals, their aggression, though this never translates into an attack on humans, reports of livestock loss or dog injuries and, finally, their predominantly rural locations. Common too, is the shroud of mystery and disbelief. The Mid

Norfolk MP, Keith Simpson, enquired at a Parliamentary debate on the issue:

> How should we regard the sightings of big cats in Mid Norfolk? It could be merely an extension of folklore going back to the 18th Century… Perhaps it is merely a question of farmers looking for compensation… Perhaps our thriving tourist industry in Mid Norfolk is looking for its equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster… However, the overwhelming majority of sightings of big cats… have been reported by perfectly normal, rational members of the public'' (Hansard, 2nd February, 1998).

Clearly, these are no feline Loch Ness Monsters but, for the most part, genuine sightings backed up, on occasion, by footprint and other evidence. What is equally certain is this is not the result of any natural migration. Neither is it some misguided re-introduction scheme. While there might be some genuine debate about the numbers involved (few scientific observers accept the figure of 100), the recent lynx capture does to some degree contradict the Ministry of Agriculture's insistence, both in a 1995 report by the South Western Agricultural Development and Advisory Service, and in a Parliamentary answer in 1998, that ''reports of big cats are still in the category of … mythical creatures'' (Hansard, 2nd February, 1998).

If there are ''alien big cats'' within Britain, their origin is notably more prosaic and mundane, more to do with shifting legislative imperatives than with ecological restoration. The British Dangerous Wild Animals Act, passed in 1976, made it illegal to keep exotic and dangerous pets without a licence. Many owners are known to have simply liberated (when they did not destroy) their ''pets'' rather than apply for a licence and undertake the necessary protective installation that such a licence required. However, this was over 20 years ago. The continued and indeed expanding number of sightings suggests either a growing national psychosis or that these animals are indeed breeding in our Green and Pleasant Land. It is worth noting that this explanation of species re-introduction (release from illegal sanctuaries, breeding centres, private zoos and collections) was also initially forwarded in France for the re-appearance of the wolf in the Mercantour.

Nonetheless, what is significant here is less the scientific veracity of their presence than popular belief and interest. Media attention to the Alien Big Cat phenomena resurfaces annually, specialist organisations are formed (for example, the British Big Cats Society, Beastwatch, Rutland and Leicestershire Panther Watch) while television documentaries multiply. The number of sightings has risen dramatically in recent years with the British Big Cat Society (2003) reporting 1077 sightings in 2002, almost double that of the year 2000. Like the famous false rumour of the re-introduction of vipers from helicopters in the French Vosges region in the early 1980s (Rémy, 1990), when the high recorded presence of snakes in areas characterised by agricultural abandonment was blamed on militant ecologists, the Big Cat phenomenon, though denied a comparable empirical starting point (identified numbers of creatures) nonetheless appears to reveal a comparable level of societal unease tempered by fascination. Hence, the big cats might be construed as a willingness to believe in the potency of the wild, even within our tamed countryside. More importantly, they illustrate, like Rémy's study of vipers, the continued presence of the irrational in society's relationship to nature. As a speaker at a recent public debate put it:

> We are dealing with the real living flesh and blood animals and we are dealing with monsters, which, with other people in the world around us, we create in our imagination (Downes, 2000)

2.3. Protecting rare breeds

The third example of the shifting animalian taxology of rural space that I want to mention concerns the protection of rare breeds of farm animals. This is, I recognise, somewhat different from the other two because we are located here fully within the realm of domestication. However, there are nonetheless a number of points of interest relevant to our central thesis. The protection of rare breeds has gained currency in recent years. This is largely due to increasing recognition of the environmental benefits of such protection particularly in terms of maintaining biological and genetic diversity but also in protecting cultural landscapes, as such breeds are commonly associated with extensive grazing regimes. In addition, the growing availability of specific EU grants for breeders and livestock farmers willing to constitute and preserve rare species has clearly had a positive effect, aided by the increasing profile and activities of bodies such as the SAVE Foundation and, in England, the Rare Breeds and Species Preservation Trust, so amply investigated by Richard Yarwood and Nick Evans (Evans and Yarwood, 2000; Yarwood and Evans, 2000).

Great Britain has traditionally been characterised by the diversity of its sheep breeding habitats and, as a consequence, its breeds, notably the various 'elite breeds' have achieved a degree of global recognition for their quality. Perhaps this is the only area of agricultural endeavour where Britain begins to mirror France and its mosaic of local and regional agricultural systems and, ultimately 'terroirs'. As many agrarian historians have demonstrated, the British Industrial Revolution was largely made possible by the financial wealth and raw materials generated by agrarian capitalism. That agrarian capitalism was itself founded

and predicated upon a highly developed programme of breeding and eugenical selection of livestock (notably sheep breeds) leading to the virtual eradication of the great variety of UK sheep breeds (over a broadly similar time period during which the number of domestic dog breeds, for example, quadrupled). Between 1900 and 1973, Evans and Yarwood (2000) relate, 26 breeds of livestock were lost in the UK. Bodies like the Rare Breeds Survival Trust have undoubtedly helped to re-introduce 'traditional' species, the "missing pieces in the conservation jigsaw" (Evans and Yarwood, 2000, p. 244) back into the countryside, though as these authors warn, such a position sits uncomfortably with some of the recent concerns about the ways animals are manipulated. Indeed, the recent Foot and Mouth crisis has threatened many of the gains made over the last years in traditional species re-introduction.

Across Europe, the decline of 'traditional' farm species is being monitored by a number of organisations both internationally (such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the European Association of Animal Production) and nationally, (for example, the French *Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle*). According to the FAO, Europe accounts for around 27% of the world's domestic mammalian breeds currently at risk of extinction, though the risk varies with different species (Table 1). While the protection and maintenance of the genetic resource base emerges as the dominant rationale for rare breeds protection at the EU (Commission of the European Communities, 1994, 1998) and international level (notably Chapter 14 of Agenda 21, adopted at the 1992 Rio Conference), at a national and local level, concern for 'traditional' breeds is increasingly being enrolled into a somewhat different set of evolving societal demands regarding notions of authenticity, food quality and local environmental sustainability. Hence numbers of threatened Reggiana Cattle in Italy have substantially increased following the introduction of a new brand of Parmigiano Reggiano Cheese (FAO, 1999). Similarly, in France the juxtaposition of specialist food production and labelling with agri-environmental measures and specific local animals are an important factor in maintaining breeds such as the Caussenarde des Garrigues sheep (Morris et al., 2001). In this manner, a scientific drive to create and exploit a global animalian gene pool is accompanying popular concerns for local and culturally defined diversity in animals, foods and landscapes.

3. Towards a new iconography

If there is a new iconography, and I believe that one is emerging, then we might summarise its foundations in four ways. First, there appears to be an increasing sense that the animalian composition of the countryside has become too domesticated. Having excluded the wild, in order to make room for human activities, a prerequisite of civilisation, there are growing demands to bring it back. We have finally become, writes Fuller (1988), ill at ease with a nature that simply nurtures us. "I think that the Australian desert landscape provides a better metaphor for all of us today than does the idyll of an English country garden" (p. 28). Alien big cats, wolves, even Auroch cattle are emerging as the animalian components of this metaphorical shift and one that crucially has no need to be empirically embedded in objective science. Belief, rumour, irrationality and passion are, in many cases, the drivers of these demands as if the scientised nature of modernism has reached its limits—at least in the context of our rural dwelling.

Second, and related to the above, is a belief that wild animals are more authentic and, hence, more natural (much as the wilderness was to the nineteenth Century Romantics). Discussing the re-introduction of the Lynx into France, Vourc'h and Pelosse (1993) describe the "emblematic character of the predator which 'naturalises' the landscape. The animal becomes the guarantor of the naturality of the milieu in which he lives" (p. 56, my translation), a point of view frequently made in recent years by supporters of the re-introduction of wolves into the French Alpes. In a similar fashion, rare breeds are extolled for their authenticity. There is, nonetheless, a deep irony for in all the examples of species re-introduction, cryptozoology and rare breed protection presented in this paper; human intervention

Table 1
Status of races of larger farm animals in the European Union

	Not in danger	Critical	Endangered	Critical-endangered	Endangered-maintained	All
Cattle	100	13	15	23	21	172
Goats	28	7	11	0	6	52
Horses/donkeys	13	13	23	6	10	65
Sheep	171	15	19	5	19	229
Pigs	49	5	4	7	3	68
Total	354	60	72	41	59	586

All figures are races
Source: FAO World Watch List for Domestic Animal Diversity, 1995. European Association for Animal Production 'Animal Genetic Data Bank.

and agency is ever present. Indeed, the degree of human management sometimes exceeds that usually reserved for domesticated beasts. The focus of much of the early debate in France was on whether the wolves were re-introduced or simply walked into the area on their own. This might seem a little indulgent, but it is, in fact, fundamental. According to an internal survey carried out by the Mercantour National Park in 1999, the vast majority of shepherds and upland livestock farmers in the region do not accept that the return of the wolf was a natural phenomenon but believe that the wolves were re-introduced covertly by agents of the French Ministry of the Environment or by environmental NGOs, something the Ministry has always strenuously denied. In opposing the Ministry over the re-introduction issue, hunting and farming interests challenged the legitimacy of the animal as genuinely 'wild' and its place in the Alpes as 'natural'.

In Scotland, there is currently talk of re-introducing the wolves to specific controlled areas. In other States, like Norway, Finland and Austria, the wolves are recolonising naturally—moving into formerly farmed areas from the wild areas they fled to with the increase in cultivation. These are all wolves and they are all wild and the ecological impact of their arrival is likely to be broadly similar but, as Katz (2000) points out they are predicated upon very different conceptualisations of 'nature' and the relationship between human and non-human agency. Does the re-introduced wolf, helicoptered in (as in the case of Yosemite National Park in the US), have the same symbolic and 'natural' value as a wild natural species? ''The presence of human intentionality'' Katz argues, ''creates a clear distinction between human artefacts and natural entities'' (2000, p. 37). Yet this is quickly forgotten when falsified images of pumas standing on Dartmoor Tors are used to herald the return of the wild and of real nature.

Third, inevitably, these substitutions call into question the managed nature that we have become familiar with, as well as the practices and interests that generate and sustain it, whether they be pastoralism, hunting, wetland management and so on. Icons of domestication and careful management, for example, Alpine sheep and cattle, are no longer as pertinent and as symbolic of 'real' nature as they had become. In South Western France, the alpine pastoral system has, over the last 20 years, been heralded as a model of sustainable and multifunctional farming that responds to a set of very different social demands: that of the local agricultural and rural population for a productive rationale and for legitimacy as 'producers' and valid economic actors; that of the ecologists who recognise the important function played by grazing in maintaining species rich grassland ecosystems, that of the tourists who demand open and accessible uplands; that of local councillors charged with minimising the risks of avalanches and forest fires. As a counterweight to processes of agricultural abandon and the ineluctable expansion of winter sports, the pastoral system has become the centrepiece of a policy of nature management the very success of which has largely paved the way for the re-appearance of that archytypical natural predator, the wolf. The rationale and the *raison d'être* of upland farming systems has been re-cast, at least in the eyes of wider society (increasingly seeing itself as the banker of this process), as being that of environmental, landscape and wildlife management (Table 2). This tension between two identities, the one held by farmers of themselves, the other held by an essentially urban society of farmers, has become explicit in the wolf issue: wolf as death, wolf as rebirth. The 'wolf as death' idea was graphically illustrated a few years ago when farmers in the affected area, on discovering a dead wolf, 'hung' it as in a mock execution. Yet for both those in favour of the re-introduction and those against, the wolves occupy similar symbolic territories. On the one hand, the wolves belong to a former outside, to a wild and 'virgin' (untouched) nature that had no place within the modernising world. On the other hand, their presence signifies that the clock *can* be turned back, that humanity's presence has not brought about irrevocable changes, that the errors of the past *can* be corrected. Where these two sets of interests differ is in their responses to this common symbolism. For the ecologists, the return of the wolf is ''ideologically useful'' (Gaillard, 1999). For the farmers, shepherds and hunters, not only do they still have no place in a still modernising world, (one where the 'natural contract', to use Michel Serres term, is still that of a 'natural order) but that references to 'turning the clock back' reveal an

Table 2
The changing context of rural/environmental policy in the Var département

From a productive and occupied territory to rural decline 1830–1975		Reconstructed pastoralism	Wilderness?
1866	1988	1980–2000	2000 onwards
Sheep: 140,500	Sheep: 49,400	Less favoured area payments	Wolves
Agricultural population: 148,000	Agricultural Population: 31,200	Agri-environment payments	Lynx
			Chamois
Total population: 284,000	Total population: 814,000	National Park	Sheep (?)
		Natura 2000	Goats (?)

entirely spurious historiography for in the good old days, farmers and shepherds were able to shoot and hunt—through a form of local social management (Bobbé, 1993)—the wolves that preyed upon domestic herds. Yet even within this newly appropriated wild, divisions still exist. Why should farmers be reimbursed for sheep killed by wolves and not for lambs killed by foxes?

Fourth, this new iconography cannot be divorced from the changing role and function of rural areas in contemporary society. Observers of the wolf and bear re-introduction in France have been quick to see in this an urban–rural or consumption–production polarisation, however artificial (Besset, 2000) with both 'sides' employing the symbolism of the wild beasts to defend their positions (a situation totally analogous to similar strategies adopted by the pro and anti hunting lobbies in both the UK and France). Hence, in the Pyrénées, the bear has become symbolic of local shepherds' refusal to alter their pasture management practices to accommodate local animal populations and the aesthetic and naturalist sensibilities of city dwellers. The re-introduction (natural or not) of wolves into the Alpes was described by one political leader as "a provocation against rurality and the rural world" (Bayrou, 2000, my translation, see also Skogen and Krange, 2003) though more and more local commune leaders are beginning to see the financial benefits to be obtained from wolf-driven rural tourism. For the novelist Houellebecq (1998), these *prises de position* take on an additional dimension. "The socialists are in collusion. They are against the sheep because the sheep are right wing while the wolves are on the left" (p. 253, my translation). The politicisation of the wolf issue inevitably and crucially raises the question of appropriate forms of nature governance and conflict mediation. In France, the *Parcs nationaux* (particularly those of Mercantour and Pyrénées) have been closely involved in supporting the re-introduction of wolves, bears, ibix and lynx. However, their role in witholding information on wolf re-introduction until legal mechanisms for protecting the species could be enacted is held as a key factor in polarising local conflict and in excluding the local farming population from the subsequent policy process (Estrosi, 2003). The charge has been made that the *Parcs nationaux* operate far more closely with voluntary nature protection organisations (more numerous that the wolves themselves, in the words of a critical Parliamentary report, Estrosi, 2003) than they do with local communities.

4. Conclusion

This paper has sought to show how contemporary constructions of nature and of rurality are being predicated upon a new and highly differentiated emphasis on the wild and the 'natural' and their associated iconography. The homogenised and largely sanitised nature of much of the European countryside is being challenged both by our own reconstitution of nature and its value within rural space and by nature's own response to our reconfiguration of it as (comfortably) wild. Today's icons, like their pre-modern equivalents, contain coded messages that expose differential social priorities and lines of demarcation. Animals, as icons of nature and of rurality, reveal a set of societal shifts concerning the changing relations between, on the one hand, the systems and the mechanisms of production and human endeavour and, on the other hand, forms of consumption and cultural commodification. Here the wolf is exemplary as representing, for some, raw, untamed nature (as opposed to organised and pastured nature), migratory and marginal (against sedentary and societal forms of organisation), savage and predatory (in a setting where grazing practices dominate). As such, the wolf becomes a highly contested social category (Kleese, 2002). The alien big cats occupy some boundary between mythology and nature: "the wild animals that reason cannot domesticate" (Descamps, 2000, p. 23) like the infamous *Bête du Gévaudan* (Louis, 2000). The multiplication of their sightings reveals a desire to read a new wildness into the 'pleasing prospects' of rural England. The rare breeds go beyond gene-pool conservation; rusticity, albeit 'recreated', is held to bring society closer to a 'natural' history. Where does this leave us with respect to the eternal nature–culture divide?

The examples investigated in this paper reveal how nature and social practices and values are inextricably interlinked and, following the quotation at the start of this paper, co-constitutive. In the context of the countryside, that co-constitution has always been particularly apparent. Today it is taking on new and more varied forms involving different human and animalian actors. The return of wild and wilder species, whether through direct or indirect human agency (for the 'return' is never wholly distinct from that agency) is both a material re-introduction and a symbolic and iconographic reconfiguration and appropriation of nature and its place in rurality. Here we move into a realm identified by Woodgate and Redclift (1998, p. 21) who assert: "We must move beyond the position where nature is viewed as *either* the material conditions of our existence *or* as no more than a set of culturally generated symbols". While Katz's (2000) offers a relatively inflexible duality, reminiscent of the 'grand partage' that Latour sees as characterising modernism (Latour, 1991), Mougenot, (2003, p. 212) suggests that "a binary society–nature approach no longer has any sense". Nevertheless, though popular and scientific interest in wild species re-introduction might be seen as retreat

from the familiar anthropomorphised nature of rural Europe, the mechanisms for re-introduction and the value placed upon its achievement are fundamentally emeshed in local social practices. The recent French parliamentary report on the wolves 'crisis' is clear on this point: "There is only nature that is organised by and for man [sic] and this must remain at the centre of our priorities" (Estrosi, 2003, p. 13, my translation). What is important here, is that the spatial and societal re-appropriation of the wild and the 'more natural' within rural Europe, marks a significant stage in a progression towards, in Latour's (2002, p. 21) words, "the end of nature as the 'other' in politics", a point echoed by Whatmore (2002, p. 34) in her call for a reconfiguration of the wild "on the 'inside'"; for ultimately, as this paper has striven to show, the outside is less and less distinct.

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